

The Minett Varnish Kiln
(Minett and Company)
Delawanna Avenue
Clifton, Passaic County, New Jersey

HABS-NJ-560

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, F.A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

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Owner: Charles S. Morris

Date of Erection: 1853

Architect: Unknown

Builders: (Original owners) Joseph Minett and Francis
S. Wynkoop

Present Condition: Abandoned and in some decay

Materials of Construction:

Exterior walls and roof - brick dome
stuccoed outside
Interior walls - brick
Chimney - brick, built in center of
dome

Historical Data:

This kiln, unique in our survey, a massive seven-part oven or furnace, was erected 1853 by business of manufacturing varnish. The plant is constructed of brick and is situated in that section of Clifton which is also known as Delawanna. The large brick chimney running up through the center of the kiln no longer serves its purpose, but its condition blackened by smoke and heat, and the appearance of the lower portion of the structure, is an indication of the amount of business which took place after its erection.

Notes on Varnish: There are two types of varnishes manufactured, one quite a distinct industry from the other. One is spirit varnish; the other is known as the oil varnish. The latter type was made in the kiln in Clifton.

In making oil varnish it is necessary to have a plant well constructed with chimneys, fireplaces and large kettles. It is also necessary that a man stand over each kettle to attend to the melting of material and remove it to large tanks to settle. The rooms or compartments of the kiln in which these men work are generally referred to as the "mixing room" and "melting room".

However, in the manufacture of Spirit Varnish, fewer hands are employed to take the alcohol and shellac, put them into a churn and set the machinery going. In America, all fine pieces of furniture are finished in oil varnish, because of the high polish and durability of the finish. The principle constituents of oil varnishes are resins and drying oils; spirit varnishes are solutions of resins in alcohol.

In the drying of varnishes, heat is applied in a closed compartment (fitted with a fume escape such as a large chimney) to expel the vehicle and then fuse the residue which then resembles sheet glass in its uniformity smoothness and lustre. The stoving operation is "Japanning" and the operative is a "Japanner". Both oil and spirit varnish are used in Japanning and it is probable that Minett and Wynkoop, manufactured spirit varnish on a small scale which they used in making Japans in this kiln. An advertising pamphlet of 1896 or later, issued by the Minett Varnish Company, 60 Pearl Street, New York City, the works being at Delawanna, New Jersey, successors to Minett and Wynkoop, "Established 1844", offered eight kinds of Baking Japans, two of Air-Drying Black, and five of Baking Varnish.*

It is certain that the use of varnish dates back many years. In the library of St. Marco, Venice, there exists a treatise by Marcian, dating

*Data from original pamphlet

from the year 1520 which contains a certain number of formulae for making varnish. In 1350 the following method was made known by one Alcherius, "In order to make good varnish take an aromatic resin the fracture of which is clean and brilliant, place it in a vase upon which thou shalt place another vase cemented on to the first, the bottom thereof is perforated; place upon the fire till melted and take two parts of linseed, hempseed or sweet oil which thou placest on the fire; put on the gum, blow up the fire and boil for one hour, taking care that the flame does not touch the liquid, then remove it from the fire and pour off into a clean vase, and when thou desirest to coat a painting, take some on thy finger as if thou uset a brush".

At the Metropolitan Museum in New York there are to be seen articles coated with Egyptian varnish which has been applied with a knife; and considerable astonishment has been awakened by the fact that this varnish does not present any traces of cracking. However, varnish can be traced to a period of still greater antiquity. According to Pliny, who is the most ancient writer on this subject, the painter Appellus, who lived 350 years before Christ, used to apply to his paintings a product of his own composition, which not only protected but at the same time imparted a lustrous appearance to them -- both characteristics peculiar to varnish(a).

The history of the Minett Varnish Company tract by successive transfers as found on record follows: By his will dated 11 March 1846 and proved 17 July next Henry I. Speer of Aquackononk, Passaic County, devised his homestead farm to his son Burnet now residing thereon, giving the "old" homestead to his son Henry, and a house and lot to his daughter Nelly, his executors to sell any or all of his land for the best advantage of his heirs. Accordingly, by deed of 8 April 1853, the executors sold the

(a) Ch. Coffegner, Varnishes, Their Chemistry and Manufacture, N.Y.C. 1923, pp. 1 etc. J.G. McIntosh, Manufacture of Varnish, London 1911, Preface.

homestead farm, now a thirty-eight acre tract of land having some 450 feet frontage on Passaic River, to Joseph Minett and Francis S. Wynkoop. As partners, these grantees had formed Minett and Company in 1844 and they erected on this tract the kiln here considered, evidently in 1853.

Joseph Minett was a resident of Hudson County, his will is dated April 18, 1853 just ten days after he and Wynkoop purchased the Speer property. He devised legacies to brothers Frederick A. Minett of London, Julius Minett of Louisville and others and the residue of his property "all of which residue is now in use in the business of Minett and Company" to his brother Julius, Joseph H. Coxe and partner Francis S. Wynkoop. The will and codicil were probated in Hudson County on October 21, 1853. A certified copy of same was filed in Passaic County on June 20, 1896.

Francis S. Wynkoop continued in the business of manufacturing varnish until 1 March 1869, on which date he sold the 9.26 acre "factory lot" and right of way to Augustus W. Reynolds of New York for twenty-seven thousand dollars. The kiln is now located on a tract of land nine acres and twenty-six hundredths of an acre in size, and includes a right of way fifteen feet in width and nine hundred and fifty-four feet long, leading from the factory or kiln out into River Road.

On June 6, 1896 a certificate of incorporation was made under the name of "Minett Varnish Company" by Alfred E. Knight of Brooklyn, James F. McBride of Aquackononk and William B. Jandon of New York. By deed of 15 June next, the corporation bought the property from the heirs of Augustus Reynolds, the latter having died in Kingston, Ulster County, New York sometime prior.

In 1903 the Minett Varnish Company, now a corporation of the State of New Jersey, ceased manufacturing varnish because of financial difficulties, and on October 12, 1903, the 9.26 acre factory lot was purchased by Frederick A. Booth, a creditor. Three

years later the premises were conveyed by Booth to Charles S. Morris. On February 9, 1937, Edgar L. Nash, his son-in-law and attorney, executed a contract of sale of part of the land to one Thomas Hand of Aquackononk which tract includes the varnish kiln. The 1939 tax list filed by the City of Clifton lists Charles S. Morris as owner of the premises.

Reference:

Search of title in land and probate records of Passaic County by Joseph Benenati, H.A.B.S. abstractor

Lucius D. Cook

Supervising Historian

Approved:

Seymour Williams

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District Officer

7/16/40 12/10/40